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# Narratives That Move

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**Abstract.** Mobile technologies continue to challenge the way we think about communication. In this paper, I suggest the use of three tenets of Aristotelian poetics as a framework for thinking about movement in mobile narration. The tenets are matched to production, product and usage of narratives.

**Keywords:** Narrative theory, mimesis, peripeteia, anagnorisis, mobile narration.

## I Introduction

For millennia, narrative has been one of man's favorite tools of persuasion and of exchanging experiences and viewpoints. Drawing on essential human cognitive faculties, narration is common to all mankind, in all cultures, at all times, and continues to be explored through every media we have at our disposal and for every communicative aim we can think of. It is therefore natural to turn to narrative theories in order to better understand new and important media phenomena such as the mobile revolution [4]. To narrate means to create a textual representation of a world such that others may use this text to find something being mediated through successions and transformations of events and states in that world. It follows that narratives must necessarily unfold in time. But according to most definitions of narrative, spatial movement is not considered a precondition for narrative on par with temporality [5]. The reason is the obvious fact that stories may take place in just one location without any movement required on the parts of any involved in the production or use of the story. Such stories are relatively rare, though, and must be considered exceptions to the 'rule' that narrative involves not only temporal but also spatial dimensions.

Still, the prototypical scenario for narrative production and consumption often leaves physical movement to the characters belonging to the narrative action. It is the characters that move from place to place in order to achieve certain effects or certain goals, while the author and especially the audience move very little. But as we continue to investigate the possibilities of mobile media, this might change. While it is well understood and described in narrative theory that the progression of stories often (although not always) entails physical movement, it is less often addressed that processes of telling and being told may also require physical movement. There are, however, a wide range of instances of narrative production and usage that unfolds in different ways. In this paper, I consider ways in which physical movement is of importance to aspects of narration. Guided by three tenets from Aristotelian poetics, I suggest that aspects of movement in narrative production and use may be better understood, and by doing so, I propose a framework for thinking about movement in mobile narration.

## 2 The good story

In Aristotelian terms, the good story must embody at least three principles: mimesis (μίμησις), peripeteia (περιπέτεια), and anagnorisis (ἀναγνώρισις) [1]. In this section, these principles are examined, in the following, they are applied.

### 2.1 Mimetic texts

Narrative, unlike other modes of communication (such as those described in rhetoric) operates under a slightly 'dubious' contract between the producer and the user of the narrative. Usual claims of correspondence with reality – e.g. truth conditions – are suspended in favor of a contract of mimetic relevance. The narrator is in other words not obligated by the truth of his telling; quite the contrary: most stories are nowhere near true, but rather the narrator is obligated to provide proof of relevance of his story to the lives of those who listen to it. Under this narrative contract of communication we readily accept alien worlds or galaxies and dozens of highly unlikely life forms, as long as some mimetic quality convinces us of the importance of their doings. I do, for instance, not believe that there ever was a king who could turn things into gold by a mere touch, but I do in fact believe that some people care more about their businesses than about the lives of their sons and daughters. And I do not literally believe in a Middle Earth with elves and orcs, but I firmly believe in the importance of friendship, power, endurance, trustworthiness, and other matters described in such stories. The mimetic quality avail itself in a strange capacity in the human mind: we readily sift through make-believe worlds with absolutely no credibility on the lookout for things and relations that have resonance in our lives. Never mind that a story postulates the possibility of a million light-years of spaceflight only to arrive in a colony of English speaking humanoids – as long as those humanoids experience things that we recognize as important, friendship or love for example. Mimesis must thus establish a bond between sender and receiver, a bond of resemblance and relevance. But in order for the narrative to work, it is not sufficient to identify a problem or a theme as something of relevance. If the progression of events is to appeal to any audience, it is also required to introduce something less ordinary.

### 2.2 Peripeteic texts

A successful narrative depends on mimetic resemblance. Yet it also depends on estrangement as a method of maintaining interest. The tension between the known and the unknown – the ordinary and the out of the ordinary are two major forces of narrative, since antiquity theorized as mimesis and peripeteia, respectively. Traditionally understood as the 'reversal of fortune', peripeteia has in more recent years been more broadly described as the unexpected [3],[7]. That is to say, while mimesis maintains a relation of relevance, peripeteia introduces a relation of interest. Such reversals – or transitions – can come in many shapes and forms, and take character as well as setting as patient: going from rags to riches means to undergo peripeteia, and so does becoming a secluded soul: 'becoming' being the operative word in this case. In many cases, peripeteic revolts appear suddenly and surprisingly both to the characters to which the events apply, and to the audience witnessing it. Such abrupt transitions may be effective and captivating dramatic devices, although the 'long haul' e.g. of a total deroute may also have strong

emotional appeals. Common to peripeteic upheavals is that they are beyond control of the characters that experience them, brought about by greater forces, and framed by the mimetic effort of the narrative. As such, these transitions are often accompanied by the feeling of loss of control or loss of power, as in a shipwreck or as in someone stealing your identity. Peripeteia is a major force in making the audience ask: “What happened then?”

### 2.3 Anagnoristic texts

Still according to Aristotle, a third component is required to ensure a full and appealing narrative, namely the recognition of something important; a change from ignorance to knowledge. It is commonly understood that the very word ‘narrative’ stems from the Latin ‘gnarus’ (to know) which again stems from the root “γνώ” (gnō) as in anagnorisis. This could be interpreted as to say that the anagnoristic aspect of narrative is in fact touching the very core of narration as a communicative endeavor; that the most pertinent element of narrative is to understand something essential about a situation or about oneself. Philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur [7], Peter Brooks [2], and Frank Kermode [6] have argued that narrative is important to us in part because of the limitations in our own lifespans. Returning to the definition given in the introduction, narrative must then be understood as bringing about some kind of knowledge through arrangements of the familiar and the unfamiliar. In literature, clear-cut examples of anagnorisis includes Oedipus discovering the truth about his parents, and Malcolm Crowe (played by Bruce Willes) discovering his true state in ‘The Sixth Sense’.

## 3 Kinds of movement

In order to see how these Aristotelian insights can be used in discerning movements in mobile narration, we must first ask: “Who moves?” The three most obvious answers to that question are: Firstly, the producers of the narrative may move. These include physical authors, film crews and other design crews. Secondly, the characters within the narrative may move. This includes any consciousness and any point of view within the text. And thirdly, the audience may move.

### 3.1 Moving producers

Producers may move for many reasons, e.g. to seek inspiration or to research stories. Obvious examples are visual narratives produced on location. The production of cinematic narratives in many cases entails extensive travelling for location scouting and for shooting at various locations. Mobile guides, for instance, typically work by means of establishing a mimetic relation between production (on a small screen) and point of interest in the physical surroundings of the intended use of the production.

It seems natural to suggest that producers primarily move for mimetic reasons.

### 3.2 Moving characters

Characters move by the will of the producers, and they move in order to advance the plot – or parts of it. A prototypical example is the road movie. The movements of characters may thus reflect the mimetic intentions of the producers, but equally important: characters move in order to change or in order to signify change.

It seems natural to suggest that characters primarily move for peripeteic reasons.

### 3.3 Moving audiences

There may be a mimetic component in wanting to move audiences, e.g. to follow the actual trail of someone. The impressive productions from [www.untravelmedia.com](http://www.untravelmedia.com) provide fine examples of this. There may also be peripeteic motives such as producing the bodily feeling of ‘getting there’. Such elements can be incorporated in game-like narrative structures, as currently explored by builders of Mediascapes at [www.mscape.com](http://www.mscape.com). But the success of such motives is likely to be strengthened if combined with an epistemological gain for the audience. In pure form, one may think of the pilgrimage as a historical precursor to modern mobile narratives.

It seems natural to suggest that audiences could move for anagnoristic reasons. However, this challenge is yet to be met by mobile storytellers and game designers.

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